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PAINTINGS IN MANUSCRIPTS

THE little gallery in Gunsaulus Hall that for the present houses the Art Institute collection of manuscripts and additional illuminations left by generous owners from the Caxton Club exhibition is eloquent of the importance of illuminated manuscripts in an art museum. Quite aside from their manifold interests and extraordinary value for the history of civilization, what a wealth of aesthetic stimulation they have: color, texture, calligraphy, the design of initial and border, the pictorial expression of miniature and historiation. And in the masterpiece, the perfect page in which all these elements are gathered into an absorbing unity; or better still, the whole book in which harmonious intention is found throughout.

Historically they reveal not only the story of the book as an *objet d'art*, but, included therein, a continuous tale of evolving ornament, calligraphy and pictorial art. In the last aspect their value is still little understood. Miniatures in manuscripts are our chief means for reconstructing any continuous history of European painting—Italy in large part excepted—before the fifteenth century.

For illustration we may consider that territory comprising Belgium and the north of France, politically and artistically, in the middle ages as today, the heart of western Europe. There painting bursts forth in full florescence in the early years of the fifteenth century, a seeming miracle: a painting of jewel-like color, consummate technique and an elaborate tool of representation that shows many years of development in the ease with which it handles form, texture,



PORTRAIT OF GENERAL KUO TZU-YI
BY LIU SHAN, OF THE T'ANG DYNASTY
FROM THE COLLECTION OF DR. J. C. FERGUSON

perspective and other naturalistic facts.

How did it develop, this finished art of the Flemish Van Eycks and the Walloon Master of Flémalle? Wars and iconoclastic madness, the ravages of time and neglect due to changing values,

have almost entirely destroyed pre-fifteenth century paintings on wall and panel. There are not enough left even to hint at the story—a few fourteenth century panels and scattered frescoes of earlier centuries, half-effaced, emerging from whitewash, suffering from “restoration.” Yet almost the whole fascinating story is preserved within the pages of the illuminated book.

There we can trace the history of this painting back to its source in classical tradition. Indeed manuscripts brought by Christianizing monks in the early centuries were the means of introducing art traditions into this “heart of Europe.” Not only did they furnish models for other illuminations but were the source of iconography, method and aesthetic inspiration for larger painting, sculpture and other arts. The Roman-Byzantine tradition prevailed for centuries, often flaming into fine expression in the hands of some creative spirit, but showing little disposition to grow. Despite contact with more purely classical tradition it retained on the whole its unprogressive dogmatic character until communal Gothic with fresh and smiling naturalism swept away all hieratic bonds and gloom.

By the beginning of the thirteenth century miniatures were following the lead of the swiftly culminating architecture and its natural complements of sculpture and stained glass. They show delicate expressive little figures, reflecting the slender types of Gothic sculpture, disposed decoratively in architectural frames or enacting stories with vivacity and ease. Backgrounds are a blaze of burnished gold. Colors, commonly red and blue, outlined in black, apparently

emulate the splendor of stained glass.

From now on the story is one of ever increasing naturalism and of the broadening—not necessarily improving—of aesthetic interests. In the fourteenth century colors are varied and outlines discarded. Figures are modeled up in light and shade against dazzling patterned grounds. Later the background breaks to admit a bit of landscape or interior view; and by the fifteenth century the decorative ground gives way entirely and we have the developed picture with figures indoors or in a spacious landscape, all naturally disposed.

This, with all the sins of generalities, at least hints at the long development that led to the northern “renaissance” and the importance of miniatures in determining and understanding that development. It is a subject that has all the thrill of new exploration for a vast material still awaits the student, with many problems of bewildering interest and complexity.

The Art Institute has already the beginning of a manuscript collection, happily with a nucleus of well selected Gothic works. The collection will of course proceed on the basis of aesthetic value—that primary concern of an art museum. But if within that aspect an eye could be kept to historical sequence it might be possible to reconstruct by significant examples—and by a few copies, perhaps, from the periods of which no examples can be procured—the long art story of those shadowy centuries before the Renaissance. And this presents the case of the illuminated manuscript in the museum from but one out of its many pertinent aspects. L. C. DRISCOLL.